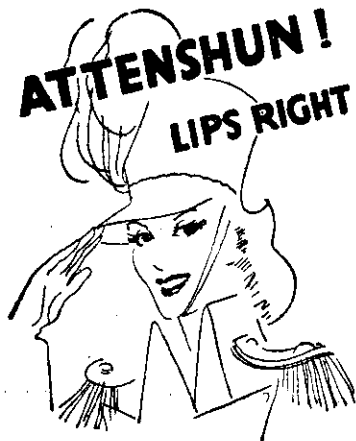


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Film Reviews by G.M.

THE MIXTURE BY CHAPLIN

THE GREAT DICTATOR

(United Artists)

ONCE or twice in the past, I have noticed how an important film which arrives with a flourish of trumpets after a great deal of advance publicity, creates the paradoxical situation of making the public unusually critical and the critics unusually complacent. The public, having been led to expect perfection, is disappointed if the film falls short of it: on the other hand, the advance "build-up" may have the effect of stifling criticism by over-awing those whose job it is to be critical. Something of this sort has, I believe, happened with *The Great Dictator*. Here is a film which has been discussed for several years past, which has become an issue in international politics, and which, for the first time in history, has been launched with benefit of BBC. The reason for that—and a very good one—is, of course, that Chaplin's picture was regarded by the authorities in England as first-rate propaganda (though Chaplin himself has, I think quite wrongly, disclaimed any such intention). In the circumstances, a critic might very well hesitate before he ventured to suggest that *The Great Dictator* is not all that has been officially claimed for it. From the very nature of the subject, any criticism may seem to smack of lèse-majesté. However, I'll risk it, because after all, a film reviewer is supposed to be concerned primarily with entertainment rather than with politics or propaganda, just as he should do his best to take an

objective view and be on guard against the mood of the moment.

* * *

Having thus cleared the decks, I'll say that the outstanding impression from *The Great Dictator* is one of unevenness. Chaplin has used four ingredients—satire, slapstick comedy, sentiment and realism—but they just won't mix properly. It is the realism that is the incongruous element. There are many individually brilliant and artistic episodes, but regarded as a whole, the film falls short of being a work of art worthy of comparison with the comedian's masterpieces of the past. Chaplin has struck his blow for democracy. He has held the dictators up to ridicule, and expressed his sympathy with their victims. He has made a picture which, on curiosity value alone, should pack the theatres for weeks to come. In short, he has been topical. But in order to be topical he has had to sacrifice artistic validity. The sacrifice may, in the circumstances, be worth while; but I think that the result will be that Chaplin's newest picture will be forgotten comparatively soon and that few people will want to see it more than once, whereas *The Kid*, *The Gold Rush*, *Shoulder Arms*, and other early Chaplin films are written into the history of the screen for all time. Most of us would flock to see them again if we got the chance.

* * *

There is the point, too, that *The Great Dictator* rather misses even on the score of topicality. It has reached us at least two years too late. Hitler is now very far beyond a joke, if indeed he ever was one. In the character of Dictator Hynkel, Chaplin treats Hitler as just a sinister buffoon, forgetting none of the popular legends about his frequent brain-storms, his vanity, his passion for blonde typists, and for being photographed holding babies. It is often amazingly clever caricature, reaching inspired heights in the burlesque of a Hitlerian speech in which Chaplin almost literally chokes himself with a spate of guttural noises, and in his bubble dance with a globe of the world. Jack Oakie's presentation of Mussolini is also burlesque de luxe (though Chaplin surely miscalculated when he conceived the Italian dictator as riding roughshod over his German off-sider, as Oakie does in several slapstick sequences). But the question does arise whether this ridiculing of the two dictators is really such good propaganda as some people seem to think. Haven't we been too prone all along to treat them too lightly? It would be a different story if the Germans and Italians could see the film.

* * *

But to get back to the unevenness which I have described as the film's chief characteristic. It strikes you from all sides. There is the incongruity between



the characters of "Herring" and "Garbitsch," the Dictator's satellites. "Herring," as played by Billy Gilbert, is rightly presented in boldly satirical outlines: "Garbitsch," on the other hand, is sinister in a melodramatic way, and not the least bit funny. Why? Again, there is the incongruity between Chaplin's portrait of the little Jewish barber, an irrepressible clown, and Maurice Moscovitch's portrayal of his Jewish neighbour, a tragically serious old man. But the real disharmony in the picture arises from Chaplin's attempt to unite clowning and satire with the grim reality of anti-semitic brutality. Most of us, I suppose, had expected that Chaplin would be giving us another comedy. Instead, we get a tragedy—at the most, a tragedy with some comic relief.

True enough, all Chaplin's pictures have had an underlying vein of tragedy, the tragedy of the little man buffeted by fate. It is this, as much as anything, that has made them immortal. But in the past, the tragic vein has been even and consistent, a kind of *leitmotiv* never obtruding noticeably on the general theme. In *The Great Dictator*, however, the tragic interludes come with the shock of a cold plunge. One minute you are laughing over some typical bit of Chaplinesque foolery, the next you are confronted with the quite unfunny spectacle of Jews being shot and beaten up on the streets by sadistic storm-troopers. Then, hardly are you getting warmed up again with some more comedy than you must take another cold bath. Finally, there is that much-discussed six-minute speech in which the little Jewish barber, forced to masquerade as the Dictator, makes an impassioned appeal for democracy and human brotherhood. *C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre*. What I mean is that, although the speech in itself is one of the finest orations of the type we have heard, it is out of place as the tail-piece of what after all purports to be a comedy. (Why not record it separately and put it over the air?).

* * *

It is chiefly because the film arouses so many confused and conflicting emotions that it fails as a work of art. And as entertainment? Well, I don't know. In

(Continued on next page)

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